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## Conceptualizing interculturality in multicultural teacher education

Kaisa Hahl & Erika Löfström

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**Abstract:** This study examined student teachers' and teacher educators' discourses about multiculturalism in an international English-medium teacher education programme in Finland. An analysis with discursive pragmatics of semi-structured interviews revealed four positioning strategies for initial responses to multiculturalism: stereotyping and othering, distancing oneself, verbalizing experiences, and downplaying multiculturalism. Although the same strategies were present to a large extent among both student teachers and teacher educators, these have different implications. The teacher educators' lack of a shared critical understanding of interculturality created uncertainty when considering multicultural issues and can lead to a situation where the coherence between the objectives, implementation methods and assessment in the programme suffers. The student teachers had difficulties transferring their immediate experiences of multiculturalism into reflections of how these may contribute to their future work as teachers. Student teachers seemed dependent on teacher educators' support in recognizing challenges with diversities as learning opportunities. Teacher educators should be provided with opportunities to compare and contest their conceptions of interculturality so that they would be able to guide student teachers in reflecting on theirs.

**Keywords:** interculturality; multiculturalism; othering; stereotyping; teacher education; Finland

### Introduction

Today's teachers work in schools that are increasingly multicultural and thus teachers must be prepared to deal with complex and sensitive issues related to equality and social justice, diversity and discrimination (Banks 2008). Teachers are important actors in guiding students in forming their world views and understanding diversity. Therefore, teachers themselves must know how to deliberate on their own conceptions about multiculturalism so that they can support their students in critically examining theirs.

As recent decades have brought in considerable changes to societies and populations in many parts of the world, it necessitates an investigation into whether and how multiculturalism is treated and incorporated in teacher preparation programmes. It is through research that it is possible to discover what aspects require more thorough

attention and how teacher education can be developed in research-based university programmes (as in the context of this study). This study set out to examine discourses in intercultural encounters in an international teacher education programme in Finland in order to find out how student teachers and teacher educators approached multiculturalism and what conceptions they had of others in the multicultural context. Although Finnish teacher education and students' achievement (e.g. in PISA studies) are highly acclaimed by international standards (e.g. Sahlberg 2015), it may not guarantee that multicultural issues are prioritized or fully empowered to facilitate learning. It is indeed the 'success story' of Finnish education that makes this an interesting context to examine different phenomena, including interculturality, at the micro and meso levels. By understanding how at the outset teachers and students consider issues related to diversity, there is an opportunity to improve future teachers' preparedness to pay attention to multiculturalism in a positive and constructive way in schools with diverse student populations. This study aims to contribute answers to the question of "what and where are the ambiguities, complexities, interconnections, causes, reasons, or possible solutions [...] of the discursive properties [...] of the people under study" (Shi-xu 2015: 5), in this case in meetings and exchanges that take place between teacher educators and student teachers and among student teachers in the context of international teacher education. Many studies in teacher education only examine these issues from the perspective of either teacher educators or student teachers, and they do not consider their own student body to be multicultural (e.g. Assaf et al. 2010; Santoro 2009; Seeberg & Minick 2012). This study aims to understand both teacher educators' and student teachers' perspectives on multiculturalism in the same context and it contributes to the knowledge base of how interculturality is constituted in a teacher education programme with a diverse student group. This study also heeds a call to pay attention to local needs while adopting global perspectives (Shi-xu 2015: 4).

### **Fostering teachers' development for multicultural schools**

The diversification of students through increased immigration and migration has made schools more multicultural than before. Student bodies have always been diverse, however, and the multi/intercultural needs to be seen from a more critical and extended perspective. One of the core problems related to multiculturalism is that the notion of 'culture' is often associated solely with issues related to ethnic origins, in particular in colloquial speech. The concepts of 'multicultural' and 'intercultural' are polysemic and have different – but also synonymous – definitions (e.g. Holm & Zilliacus 2009). The starting point of this article is a basic distinction by UNESCO (2006). On the one hand, the *multicultural* refers to the features of a group, i.e. it describes the heterogeneity and diversity of human society or group as based on the members' ethnic, linguistic, socio-economic, religious, etc. backgrounds and positions. On the other hand, the *intercultural* refers to the (positive) processes and relations of interaction and negotiation between individuals in multicultural contexts (Piller 2011).

### ***A renewed and critical understanding of interculturality***

A critical and renewed understanding of the intercultural, advocated by many scholars in education today (e.g. Dervin 2011; Holliday 2011; Piller 2011) and outlined in the following, promotes the view that each individual belongs to different cultural groups

simultaneously and negotiates his/her identities in interaction with others. The notion of culture is commonly used for finding differences between people (Wikan 2002) to the detriment of ignoring similarities. Differences might only be found between different groups of people while the diversity within each individual and between individuals belonging to the same cultural groups is ignored (Abdallah-Pretceille 2006). Culture is not fixed and stable, and it is not a rigid set of values or rules that force people to act in predetermined ways (Breidenbach & Nyíri 2009) – although it is often accused of being so. The authors' understanding of culture corresponds to that of Shi-xu (2015: 3): “the set of concepts, identities, representations, attitudes, values, symbols, styles, rules, patterns, (power) relations found in the praxis of particular social communities.”

It may be challenging for teachers and students to acknowledge the diversity in individual characteristics, dispositions, and behaviour but avoid culturalism, i.e. merely turning knowledge about various cultures, nation-states or different nationalities into stereotypes (Holliday 2011). Schools are some of the institutions where national identities are inculcated through hidden or official curricula (Piller 2011). Learning school subjects (e.g. foreign languages, history) often includes learning fixed ideas of foreigners' identities, characters and customs in which people from a particular group or nation-state are equated to stereotypes that share certain traits, characteristics or labels with each other (Hahl et al. 2015). Such approach overlooks the similarities that all humans share and ignores the individual behind the stereotype. The foreigner is made the 'Other' that is different from 'Self' (Dervin 2011; Holliday 2011).

Although stereotypes can be useful in making sense of the world, they may harm people's interactions. Usually stereotyping includes a negative connotation when the 'Other' is considered inferior to 'Self' and one's own group (Holliday 2011). Alternatively, the 'Other' can be found exotic and better than one's own group. Individuals are not seen for what they are in their own right but they are assumed to be (similar to) the stereotype that describes their groups. An assumed national identity may also be in contradiction with one's own cultural identities (Holliday 2011). When culture is made the differentiating factor between people, it is easy to use culture as an alibi for not taking responsibility for an action (Wikan 2002). Culture might be blamed for one's failures or credited for one's successes. There is also a danger to 'respect' someone's culture in such a way that the person's actions are overlooked and the actions are not seen from the perspective of social justice or equity. People thus need to develop a critical ability to question claims that blame or credit culture for actions or inactions and strive to expose their own and others' implicit assumptions behind such claims (Breidenbach & Nyíri 2009). When teachers and students learn to recognize how they use stereotypes and other culturalist conceptions of others, they can begin to see how such ideas hinder interaction and hamper a person's ability to see the other person as a unique individual (Dervin 2011; Holliday 2011).

### ***Approaching multiculturalism in teacher education***

A teacher education programme is always a compromise where a selection of courses, contents and learning objectives is fit within a framework of degree requirements and limited credits. The programmes often accommodate specific courses that focus on multicultural education with the aims of enhancing understanding of diversity between individuals (Assaf et al. 2010). For a programme to be truly intercultural, however, it is

important to integrate intercultural aspects and processes into the whole programme and not only design a separate course to address these topics (Seeberg & Minick 2012). Nevertheless, further challenges may persist as there rarely is a consensus of what multicultural education in essence is. Too often teacher education programmes lack a critical understanding of diversity, culture and interculturality, and instead of enhancing intercultural understanding, they reify stereotypes and generalisations through teaching supposedly factual knowledge about different cultures that further differentiate and distance people from each other (Abdallah-Pretceille 2006; Gorski 2009). Therefore the foundation and goal of these issues may be problematic even in programmes that incorporate intercultural content (Perry & Southwell 2011).

Teacher reflection provides a tool for analyzing and developing one's actions in teaching and learning and thus it is an important component of teachers' professionalism (Husu et al. 2008). When teachers learn to critically question the choices they make in teaching and in interactions with students, reflection becomes an integral part of teachers' pedagogical knowledge (Husu et al. 2008; Korthagen & Vasalos 2005). Reflection is also essential in the development of intercultural competences and approaching diversities (e.g. Liu & Milman 2010). In order to accomplish this, teachers, teacher educators and student teachers need to reflect on their past and current experiences, attitudes, values, emotions and expectations of diversity and consider how they deal with issues connected to multiculturalism (Dervin & Hahl 2015). That way they can connect prior knowledge with new insights, challenge their learned assumptions, and reconstruct their ideas of diversity, equity and social justice. Teacher reflection on one's own and others' actions and conceptions is a basis for understanding and responding to experiences. Reflection is not an easy skill to learn, and it requires the individual's willingness to critically and openly examine his/her own interpretations (Husu et al. 2008). Student teachers therefore need to learn to reflect on their conceptions and understanding of learning and teaching and weave them into their own personal pedagogies that they will draw upon in teaching (Loughran 2006; Turner 2012).

In teacher education it is considered important that student teachers' reflection is guided by teachers and mentors or teacher educators. A reflective dialogue with others is essential for learning to critically and more objectively review one's deeply held beliefs, conceptions and assumptions in order to either reject those ideas or adapt and transform them into a renewed understanding of the issue (Husu et al. 2008). Comparing and scrutinizing an individual's own conceptions with those of the others can help to expose one's own prejudices and blind spots (cf. Blasco 2012).

Teachers' articulation of their reflective practice is all the more important in multicultural classrooms (Turner 2012). Teacher educators need to take a proactive role in reflecting on diversity so that they can encourage and engage their student teachers in a similar practice (Liu & Milman 2010). Teacher educators as the experts should lead the way in adopting discourses and pedagogical practices that further equality and understanding the cultural 'Other' (Shi-xu 2001). Prior studies show, however, that among teacher educators and student teachers perceptions of diversity are often very different and narrow, and reflection about diversity is only examined within teaching practice or specific diversity courses (e.g. Liu & Milman 2010; Yang & Montgomery 2013; Dervin & Hahl 2015). Yet, the development of a coherent multicultural programme is dependent on teacher educators' willingness to explore their individual and shared

beliefs and practices (Assaf et al. 2010). This study aims to fill the gaps in earlier research and find out how both teacher educators and student teachers discuss and deal with issues related to multiculturalism, how they construct the ‘Other’ in their discourses, and what strategies they use in approaching diversities. The following research questions were thus set for this study:

- (1) What strategies do student teachers and teacher educators use to position themselves and other participants in intercultural encounters in the multicultural teaching and learning environment?
- (2) How does multiculturalism manifest itself in student teachers’ and teacher educators’ discourses in international teacher education?

## **Method**

This study was conducted in the first year of an international teacher education programme in a Finnish university. Its department of teacher education educates teachers and other experts in the field of education, including class teachers for elementary education and subject teachers of various subjects for basic, upper secondary and adult education.

### ***Context and participants***

The English-medium subject teacher education programme was launched as a first of its kind in Finland as subject teacher education was previously available only in Finnish and Swedish and thus not accessible to non-Finnish/Swedish speakers and international students. The one-year programme grants general teaching qualifications for subject teachers and prepares them to teach in basic and upper secondary education (typically 13–19-year-old students). Subject teacher qualifications in Finland consist of a Master’s degree, 60 ECTS credits (European Credit Transfer System, one ECTS is equivalent to 27 hours of study) of subject studies, and 60 ECTS credits of pedagogical studies. Each annual cohort integrates both Finnish and international students with experience from various educational contexts from around the world, with either a humanities or a science subject as their teaching subject. The participants have opportunities to enjoy and exploit synergy produced by the broad variety of experiences and perspectives.

However, nationality or ethnicity in itself is not a determinant in admittance to the programme. The successful applicants must pass an entrance exam interview where their suitability for becoming a teacher is assessed. The authors acknowledge that it is problematic to divide students into social categories (e.g. domestic or international students) because people move in and out of categories and belong to several simultaneously (Gillespie et al. 2012). Many of the domestic students had extensive international experience of living and studying in various countries and could thus be considered international. The international students had lived in Finland for some years and most planned to stay permanently. The distinction in this article is, however, relevant because it becomes apparent in the way the participants talk about multiculturalism.

The participants in this study were eleven student teachers (out of a total of 14 in the cohort who originated from different European countries – including Finland – Asia, and South and North America) and eleven teacher educators (out of 13 who were invited to participate in the research) in the multicultural subject teacher education programme.

Participation in the study was voluntary. The students were halfway through their one-year programme at the time of the interviews. A compulsory course on diversity education is part of the teacher education programme but the students had not taken it by the time of data collection. Most of the teachers were Finnish. As the programme was recently launched, the majority of the teachers had limited experience in teaching in English. Teaching in the courses was divided between different teacher educators, and thus the planning, organizing and teaching were more demanding than in a course that is taught by just one teacher educator. When examining a particular cohort of students or teachers, it is challenging to ensure their anonymity and protection (Cohen et al. 2007). That is why limited information about the context or participants is given. All names are pseudonyms to preserve anonymity.

### ***Data collection and analysis***

As the purpose of this qualitative study was to find out about the participants' approaches toward and positions in intercultural encounters in the teacher education programme, a semi-structured interview was chosen as the method. The interviews, conducted individually and lasting 30–60 minutes, were designed around particular themes but without fixed questions. Thus the method permitted probing into each respondent's personal experiences and conceptions, and enabled the emergence of issues that the researcher might not have previously considered (Cohen et al. 2007). The students and teachers were asked how they had experienced the multicultural environment and how they thought multiculturalism should be considered in the programme.

The interview transcripts were analyzed through multiple readings by the first author using discursive pragmatics, an interdisciplinary and intertheoretical discourse analysis approach proposed by Zienkowski (2011). Discursive pragmatics allows to 'investigate empirical data of language-related actions and processes without losing sight of the various contextual layers that play a role in these actions and processes' (Zienkowski 2011: 7). With this method a multiplicity of voices in the discourses can be revealed; hidden and unexpressed voices can be uncovered to find what is not said explicitly (Dervin 2011). As discourse is always unstable and heterogeneous, the analysis sought for latent themes (see Braun & Clarke 2006: 84) and looked beyond the face-value of what was being said. By comparing and contrasting each participant's discourses and by striving to recognize any internal contradictions and inconsistencies in them, the speakers' implicit and explicit conceptions of the intercultural could be exposed. To ensure trustworthiness, the second author validated the interpretations by reviewing the transcripts and deliberating on the chosen excerpts and the positions and strategies found in them. The authors combed the data and searched for referential strategies (i.e. what identities speakers claimed to themselves, how they talked of others) while paying particular attention to any contradictions in the participants' discourses (example from the data of student discourse: *'I've never felt myself as being very Finnish' versus 'Finns seem to have sort of a larger fear of contradicting [...] what they have been taught'*); and argumentation strategies (i.e. what kind of arguments were given, how were perspectives presented; example from the data of teacher discourse: *'Yes, [multicultural backgrounds] must be taken into account but it depends a lot on how long the people have been in Finland, and how well they have integrated into our culture or whether they want to integrate.'*). The authors then grouped the referential and argumentation strategies into

the following positioning strategies that constituted the student teachers' and teacher educators' initial responses to multiculturalism: stereotyping and othering, distancing, verbalizing experiences, and downplaying multiculturalism.

## Findings

As a general observation, the participants tended to associate multiculturalism only with international students. Multiculturalism was understood, especially by the students, as deriving simply from different origins and nationalities. Different cultures were only seen as relating to (foreign) nation-states or ethnicity. Finnish people were not considered multicultural by the students because of the Finnish context. When describing their experiences and perceptions of teaching and studying in the context of the multicultural teacher education programme, students and teachers positioned themselves and others through a variety of strategies: *stereotyping and othering*, *distancing oneself*, *verbalizing experiences* and *downplaying multiculturalism*.

### *Stereotyping and othering*

Stereotyping emerged in many students' and teachers' experiences when they explained incidents in the programme. They described others as part of a group (e.g. the natives of a country from which they originated, the domestic students, the international students) and thus instilled to them certain characteristics – either negative or positive – that supposedly pertained to all individuals from that group. Simultaneously they differentiated the particular group from themselves or their own group, i.e. the one who was considered different was made the 'Other.'

Group work was one of the situations in which stereotyping and othering manifested themselves. The teacher education studies involve a great deal of group work through class activities and presentations. Some students voiced problems of sharing responsibility and group work load equally. For example, Helen(S) found it challenging to divide work load fairly and to do the work on time. In the following excerpt, Helen seems very understanding of the reasons why her peers might not have wanted to complete a particular task:

(1)<sup>1</sup>

Helen(S): You know in some nationalities there's this 'Okay you have the skill! Wow! Bravo! Wonderful, you can do it!' It could be kind of a sign of respect or the normal way to go around this kind of activities. So you cannot take it like she's backing out because she's new at this. That she feels she's a beginner and she wants to pull out [because] she doesn't want to take responsibility. It could be the case that it's really just a kind of respect that 'You know it better, you should do that, maybe I can do something else.' [...] Also the time issues. I think that's very different with the different cultures. If there is a deadline, what does it mean?

Instead of attributing these differences to students' different dispositions or study habits, she interpreted them as deriving from different cultures. When working with people, these sorts of issues and challenges are bound to materialize. Blaming them on different cultures is going behind the cultural alibi; it does not give people an incentive to



take responsibility for their own actions (Wikan 2002). Additionally, Helen did not question her own teamwork skills but found fault with those of her peers.

Another situation in which individuals resorted to stereotyping and othering occurred when students did not behave according to expected conventions. Although the data included more occurrences of stereotyping and othering among the students, a similar positioning was also found among some teachers. Generally, the teachers had enjoyed the students' activeness and felt that both domestic and international students had contributed to discussions. Here Anne explains, however, that she was faced with a situation that she felt derived from cultural differences:

(2)

Anne(T): Some people couldn't really keep track of how much they are using of everyone's time once they get a turn to talk. [...] I was like looking at the watch 'yeah, thank you, could we just move on now.' So in some cultures perhaps they are somehow used to it that the academic discussions don't know any time limits or that it's a bit tricky. In Finland usually when a student is asked something, and even if he or she is asked for a report, it's very brief and concise and factual. But then when you come from some southern part of the world, it never ends.

Anne described the domestic students positively as model students. On the contrary, a student from another part of the world was interpreted negatively as someone who lacks discipline and consideration of others. Thus, Anne succumbed to ethnocentrism (see e.g. Shi-xu 2015) and resorted to stereotypes when describing her students. This depiction made the foreign 'Other' as a prisoner of his/her imagined culture that forced a certain behaviour (Breidenbach & Nyíri 2009: 76). Anne did not consider it a variance in personal disposition, interest or motivation, but rather a feature that originates from the different cultures/countries (often used interchangeably) that the student comes from.

A core issue appeared to be the participants' inability to distinguish between cultural characteristics and personal dispositions (Abdallah-Pretceille 2006; Holliday 2011). However, a sense of belonging and a group spirit to support each other could be sensed from many student interviews. There was a feeling of loyalty and politeness. The students were initially quite reluctant to expose views that they considered negative about their peers.

### *Distancing oneself*

The most poignant difference between teachers' and students' strategies was that of distancing oneself. While no teacher used this strategy, it was evident among the students. They distanced themselves in order to establish a position in relation to a group of people. For instance, Mikael had insinuated that 'Finns seem to have sort of a larger fear of contradicting [...] what they have been taught' and more shy of active participation than the 'students with a foreign background.' However, later on in the interview, he distances himself from this negative stereotype by describing himself as not being 'very Finnish':

(3)

Mikael(S): I've never felt myself as being very Finnish and never felt very strongly that kind of a nationalistic pull. [...] And I've found it even easier to make friends with people from other cultures and [...] that's probably part of the fact that I myself feel sort of an alien out of most people. So I can relate to them being sort of in trouble of trying to figure out how to fit in the culture. [...] So that's one of the reasons why I really see that a multicultural situation is very normal.

Mikael had created an image of Finns as a group and he felt connected to that group in certain ways. Nevertheless, he had reconstructed his own identity and realized that he is not bound to the image that he described with negative associations (Holliday 2011). While allowing himself to be fluid and diverse in his own identity, he defined the identity of a Finn in relatively fixed terms. He felt free to position himself differently and created a distance between himself and the group – and failed to recognize that others also have this right (Abdallah-Pretceille 2006). Although Mikael may not have used the strategy consciously, he protected his own identity by drawing the line and made his stand clear. Furthermore, Mikael described a 'multicultural situation' as 'very normal' to himself but assumed that international students would have some 'sort of trouble' in adjusting to a new country.

### *Verbalizing experiences*

Some participants explicitly sought to verbalize experiences in order to make sense of them. Many teachers agreed that multiculturalism should 'come through' in the discussions. They thought students should be given 'possibilities to share their cultural backgrounds and their experiences from schools and the previous educational experiences' (Emma, T). Many students and teachers mentioned the importance of raising different viewpoints and directing teaching and learning to the needs of the particular student group:

(4)

Tina(S): Somehow making benefit of the experiences of the different people with different backgrounds. For example if someone comes from China, then you should ask her/him how is this done in China and so make people share their experiences from different countries and [...] cultures.

Yet, student experiences were usually equated to habits and customs that people in a certain country/culture have (as in the quote by Tina above), and as such turned to simplified and "fragmented cultural tidbits" (Kumaravadivelu 2008: 93). Along with Tina, the students and some teachers seemed to have a solid understanding of culture. However, a critical and renewed understanding of culture (e.g. Wikan 2002) was present in some teachers' discourses. For example Harri emphasized that 'no such things as cultures that are connected with one place [exist]'. He added that 'cultures should be seen as fluent and moving.' Teachers also used words such as 'appreciate,' 'respect' or 'non-judgmental' when referring to the different perspectives shared by the students. Nevertheless, only one teacher clearly expressed the significance of discussing the students' diverse opinions. Siiri(T) considered it important that differing opinions are exposed during teacher education:

(5)

Siiri(T): There was for example one student who had very acrimonious opinions. I said that this is how it should be, these opinions need to come up because these students will become teachers in Finland. Otherwise they would be on a collision course if they start off from those perspectives.

Siiri pointed out that any opinions or perspectives against the equity or social justice of others should be discussed openly in order to establish that discrimination is not acceptable. Thus, although initially Siiri spoke of respecting all values, she later demonstrated that in practice it is important to examine what these 'values' are, and thus she refuted a potentially highly relativistic standpoint (Breidenbach & Nyíri 2009). Nevertheless, she assumed that it would be the international – not domestic students – who might have conflicting ideals. This is again an example of implicit ideas of 'Others' that may exist under well-sounding approaches (Holliday 2011).

### ***Downplaying multiculturalism***

The explicit acknowledgement of multiculturalism was also experienced as working against the good intentions. Some teachers and international students pointed out that they did not want multiculturalism to be brought up excessively as they worried that 'overemphasized' multiculturalism could hamper interaction. One student, Maria, explained her view on it:

(6)

Maria(S): I rather prefer that this multiculturalism or interculturality isn't brought up in the sessions. So that teachers teach whatever they have preferred. So if you don't put it particularly [...] as an issue. Otherwise if you see it as an issue then it is in a way that you emphasize that we are, I don't know, I can't explain it. I rather prefer that (*pause*)

Interviewer: That it's ignored?

Maria(S): It's not ignored, no. But [...] in a way we know that everyone's aware of this multicultural learning environment but nobody emphasizes it. It's not totally ignored but you don't really put it up as an issue. [...] It's really interesting to hear from other people's experiences and different interesting things from their own culture. [...] It is actually a multicultural issue but you don't emphasize it like now let's be multicultural in the classroom and then everybody talks in that way. It comes very quietly.

Maria seemed to criticize the way multiculturalism was dealt with in some sessions and she felt uncomfortable. She wanted multiculturalism (meaning the fact that the group consisted of students from around the world) to arise subtly from the discussions. Many students talked about the different experiences as being 'interesting' and that is what they undoubtedly are. However, they were rarely considered a necessary learning opportunity in one's teacher development. There seemed to be an understanding among the students that multiculturalism is solely about nationalities and different customs of 'foreign' people and they did not bring up other diversities. Thus, perhaps some international students were concerned about overemphasizing multiculturalism because they feared being othered. Maybe they wanted to downplay any differences so

that they would not stand out and so that they could better feel they were equal with the domestic students (perhaps more so than in other associations in society). If the focus of multiculturalism is on the foreignness, and not the different experiences and perceptions of all students, any learning that happens is in danger of being culturalism (Abdallah-Pretceille 2006). The opportunity of intercultural learning would in fact be bypassed and the discussion might focus on issues that increase power differences and hierarchies (Shi-xu 2001).

The teachers recognized that their students are diverse in many ways, even if for some the understanding of culture and the concept of (multi)cultural were narrow:

(7)

Leevi(T): I think that we are somehow too much concentrating on [multiculturalism]. I must say we can also do it wrongly. [...] If we are thinking of Finnish speaking students they also have some kind of differences in their backgrounds. We need not speak of cultural background but background, and as a teacher you should really understand that there are different kind of people. In this kind of group there are also cultural differences but there are also some other kind of differences.

Leevi was one of the teachers who worried of overemphasizing multiculturalism (and he seemed to relate the term multiculturalism solely to ethnic origins and foreignness). Multiculturalism was viewed mostly from the perspective of differences. Perhaps similarities between students were taken as a given and thus not expressed explicitly. However, there is a danger that the perspective of differences is based on a deficit model whereas it would be important to understand diversity that exists within individuals and groups (Holliday 2011), which is what Leevi seems to refer to above.

Some teachers believed that the issue of considering multiculturalism depended on how well the students had 'integrated into our culture.' However, integration can be understood in different ways. Does it mean adopting certain customs? Do 'we' all share those particular customs? Or does integration refer to being employed or having friends and acquaintances in the host context? The extract below suggests that Linda(T) viewed culture as something static and singular and something that only refers to ethnic culture or nation-state:

(8)

Linda(T): Yes, [multicultural backgrounds] must be taken into account but it depends a lot on how long the people have been in Finland, and how well they have integrated into our culture or whether they want to integrate. [...] Because it could of course be that if you really point a finger at it and remind about it and mention it, it can make interaction difficult. I had thought of how to ask such questions that would bring out the cultural backgrounds in content questions but not so that it would be about the person.

Linda felt that one must be 'sensitive' in discussing cultural backgrounds so that the focus is not on the individual. However, it is indeed through personal experiences and life history that teachers understand pedagogy and build their own pedagogical approaches to teaching (Husu et al. 2009; Loughran 2006). Differentiating between cultural memberships and diversity that is within a group and each individual appeared to

be problematic for many and seemed to cause hesitation among teachers when approaching the issue with their students.

## **Discussion and implications**

The participants' discourses revealed four positioning strategies for initial responses through which both student teachers and teacher educators approached multiculturalism and each other. Stereotyping and othering and verbalizing experiences were found as strategies among both students and teachers. International students sometimes downplayed multiculturalism, perhaps in the fear of being made the 'foreign' other, while some teachers downplayed multiculturalism because they seemed worried about pinpointing or being judgmental of the international students. In this data the use of distancing oneself was only prominent among the students. The analysis revealed inconsistencies in the participants' discourses and challenging notions in some approaches to multiculturalism that initially seemed well considered and justified.

A key conclusion of this study is that although both teacher educators and student teachers used the same positioning strategies to a large extent, these have different implications. If teacher educators do not have a shared, critical understanding of multiculturalism, there is a danger that they promote culturalist viewpoints and, from their more 'expert' position, pass them on to student teachers who in turn use them with their future students. Similarly to earlier research (e.g. Assaf et al. 2010), on the one hand there was an understanding among the teacher educators that all students are diverse and that it is important that their voices are heard. On the other hand they were not in unison of what multiculturalism in essence is or how multiculturalism should manifest itself in class. Their conceptions of culture seemed to range from culturalist views to critical understandings of fluid cultures. Were international students' diverse experiences simply interesting, exotic or enriching content in the sessions rather than opportunities to compare and contest all students' prior assumptions and beliefs, both local and global, and interpret them in the framework of the local educational system?

Also, if teacher educators do not have sufficiently shared conceptions about interculturality among themselves, it can lead to a situation where the constructive alignment of a programme suffers and the objectives, implementation methods and assessment practices become arbitrary (Biggs & Tang 2011). If teacher educators approach multiculturalism in very different ways in the same or different courses of the programme, and in an unreflective manner, it can send student teachers contradictory messages while failing to prepare them for analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of various perspectives. The teacher educators seemed not to take advantage of the learning potential in intercultural encounters in terms of encouraging student teachers to connect their experiences to their future work as teachers (see Turner 2012). For instance, when group work was unsuccessful, it could have been projected as an opportunity for reflection on the objectives and expectations regarding individual and group responsibility. As teacher educators become cognizant of the various conceptions that student teachers have of diversity, they can more effectively initiate discussion about how different situations may be handled in diverse student groups.

Student teachers, for their part, should be able to recognize the factors affecting their immediate experience, reflect on them and consider how these factors influence their own teacherhood and what kind of consequences these will have in the future for

their classroom practice (Loughran 2006). Thus, in agreement with prior studies (e.g. Liu & Milman 2010; Yang & Montgomery 2013), these findings highlight the students' reliance on teachers' support and guidance in order to identify challenges related to diversity as learning opportunities. Recognizing different educational foundations and prior school experiences will help students make sense of their current learning experience (Turner 2012). This should be even more pronounced in international teacher education as international students may not be familiar with the school system for which they are being qualified. By analyzing the rich learning opportunities in multicultural learning contexts, the students can transfer the experiences, feeling of otherness and encounters of diversity into positive and constructive approaches and treatment of diversities in their future classrooms (Abdallah-Pretceille 2006).

A limitation of the research is that the participants were interviewed only once during the programme. Thus, we have not been able to measure changes in conceptions. However, we were striving for understanding conceptions of a certain phenomenon at a point in which the participants had already sufficient experiences of the programme but had not been exposed to courses on interculturality. A strength of the design is that it captures the perspectives of both the teacher educators and student teachers of nearly the entire cohort, and provides a snapshot of how this one cohort, prepared only to a limited extent, tackles issues related to multiculturalism. The findings of this study have implications for the development of international teacher education. Sufficient training should be provided for both teacher educators and student teachers so that they can develop their critical skills to approach multiculturalism and scrutinize their own beliefs and conceptions of diversity and make way for renewed and redefined conceptualizations of experiences (Dervin & Hahl 2015). Teacher educators need opportunities to compare and contest among themselves their conceptions of interculturality so that they have a sufficiently shared understanding of its roles and implications for students' development as teachers (Assaf et al. 2010; Santoro 2009). If students and teachers do not learn to see past multiculturalism and the many common culturalist assumptions that easily lead to stereotyping and categorizing, there is a danger that different backgrounds and cultural differences continue to be seen as cultural hierarchy instead of individual dispositions and characteristics (Phillips 2010). When the various ways how students and teachers constitute interculturality are recognized, it is possible to deal with any obstacles that hinder truly intercultural education. As these aspects permeate all education, one's approach to multiculturalism affects his/her stance on equality and social justice. Teachers can be positive change agents in schools to encourage acceptance and appreciation of diversity but only if they have learned to critically and honestly reflect on their own discourses and behaviours first. Further research would be important to undertake about changes and developments in both student teachers' and teacher educators' conceptions of interculturality in the long run. One aspect is to find out if and how their discourses about multiculturalism may change with diversity education. In order to have access into more diverse viewpoints about multicultural discourses in practice, classroom situations could first be video-recorded and then studied together among teacher educators and student teachers. Furthermore, by recording and analyzing those group discussions, a different perspective would be gained into strategies used in group situations, which may differ from strategies used at an individual level. Such an

intervention would also encourage reflection, which can help transform one's sense of multiculturalism and develop one's pedagogy with and toward diversities.

## Notes

1. The extracts are taken from the interview transcripts. (S) denotes student; (T) denotes teacher; [...] denotes cut-out speech; [word] denotes a replacement of the original word for the sake of anonymity/clarification.

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